

SPECIAL BACK TO SCHOOL ISSUE

THE INDYPENDENT

Issue #155, September 8 – 28, 2010

A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE

WHY OUR SCHOOLS ARE BROKEN

— and how to fix them

Test Prep Madness, p4

Stanley Aronowitz on Education, p14

Parent Voices, p8



MICHAELWEIDNERNELSON.COM

The U.S. boat to Gaza, *The Audacity of Hope*, will join the next Freedom Flotilla to break the blockade and carry human rights activists to the shores of Gaza. Your donation will help purchase a boat and secure a captain and crew.

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The Indypendent is a New York-based free newspaper published 16 times a year on Wednesdays for our print and online readership of more than 200,000. It is produced by a network of volunteers who report, write, edit, draw, design, take photos, distribute, fundraise and provide website management. Since 2000, more than 650 journalists, artists and media activists have participated in this project. Winner of more than 50 New York Community Media Alliance awards, *The Indypendent* is funded by subscriptions, reader donations, grants, merchandise sales, benefits and advertising. We accept submissions that look at news and culture through a critical lens, exploring how systems of power — economic, political and social — affect the lives of people locally and globally. *The Indypendent* reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

The Indypendent is affiliated with the New York City Independent Media Center, which is part of the global Indymedia movement, an international network that is dedicated to fostering grassroots media production, and to *IndyKids*, a children's newspaper. NYC IMC is an open publishing website (nyc.indymedia.org.)

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community calendar

PLEASE SEND EVENT ANNOUNCEMENTS TO INDYEVENTS@GMAIL.COM.

FRI-SUN SEPT 10-12

Varying • Free

FESTIVAL: HOWL!

HOWL! Arts Inc. presents its seventh annual performing arts festival, featuring cutting edge art, fantasy, fun and superb family entertainment. Check online for performance times.

Tompkins Square Park, 7th -10th St at Aves A and B

212-274-1111 • howlfestival.com

SAT SEPT 11

7pm • \$5 suggested

DISCUSSION: COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE. Jordan Flaherty will lead a discussion about using independent media to promote social justice struggles. Other speakers include Victoria Law, the author of *Resistance Behind Bars*, and Jesse Muhammad, a social media strategist and journalist.

Bluestockings Books, 172 Allen St

212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

6pm • Free

BENEFIT ART AUCTION: STRICTLY GRASSROOTS. Join the Underground Arts Collective for an art auction and exhibition for the families and children of Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council, Inc., a community group that works for affordable housing and youth programs in the Upper West Side.

El Taller Latino Americano
2710 Broadway

212-665-9460 • tallerlatino.org

SUN SEPT 12

All day • Free

FESTIVAL: BROOKLYN BOOK FESTIVAL. The Brooklyn Book Festival will feature an array of literary greats and emerging authors along with themed readings and lively panel discussions.

Brooklyn Borough Hall
209 Joralemon St, Bklyn
718-802-3852 • brooklynbookfestival.org

TUE SEPT 14

7pm • Sugg \$15, Students \$5

BOOK LAUNCH: AN EVENING WITH DAVID HARVEY. This benefit for Revolution Books will celebrate David Harvey's new book, *The Enigma of Capital*.

Jefferson Market Library
6th Ave & 10th St.

Chelsea Square Restaurant
23rd St. & 9th Ave

Uptown Sister's Books
156 St. & Amsterdam

BAM
30 Lafayette Ave.

Vox Pop
1022 Cortelyou Rd.

Tillie's of Brooklyn
248 DeKalb Ave.

Tea Lounge
Union St. & Seventh Ave.

Video Gallery
310 Seventh Ave.

'sNice Café
315 Fifth Ave.

BELOW 14TH ST.

WBAL - 99.5FM

120 Wall St., 10th floor

Bluestockings

172 Allen St.

Housing Works

126 Crosby St.

ABC No Rio

156 Rivington St.

Native Bean

50 Ave. A

Mercer St. Books

206 Mercer St.

New York Public Library

Jefferson Market Branch

Sixth Ave. & 9th St.

Brecht Forum

451 West St.

4th Street Food Co-op

58 E. 4th St

Theater for the New City

155 First Ave.

P.S. 41, 116 W 11th St

212-691-3345 • revolutionbooksnyc.org

THU SEPT 16

7pm • Free

DISCUSSION: THE SOUTH IN THE '60S: WOMEN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. The CUNY Graduate Center continues its Civil Rights Movement programming this fall with a discussion about the contribution of women during the Civil Rights era. Reservation is required to attend (visit www.gc.cuny.edu/events to RSVP).

CUNY Graduate Center
Elebash Recital Hall, 365 Fifth Ave
212-817-8215 • web.gc.cuny.edu

SAT SEPT 18

7pm • Free

READING: CREATING A MOVEMENT WITH TEETH. Join editor Daniel Burton-Rose and anarcha-feminist Bo Brown for a discussion of their new book.

Bluestockings Books, 172 Allen St

212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

MON SEPT 20

7pm • Free

SPEAKER: SAMUEL MOYN. Listen to the author of *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*.

McNally Jackson Books, 52 Prince St
212-274-1160 • mcnallyjackson.com

SAT SEPT 25

9am-5pm • Free

CONFERENCE: 6TH ANNUAL WESTSIDE TENANTS CONFERENCE. This free conference will have several workshops designed to help inform and protect tenants. Workshop topics include: finding an affordable apartment, how housing court works, an overview of laws for tenants and how to organize tenants.

Fordham Law School Edith Guldin Platt Atrium & McNally Amphitheater
140 W 62nd St

212-757-1832 • law.fordham.edu

WED SEPT 29

5:30pm • Free

MEETING: NYQUEER. NYQueer works to increase access to resources that help teachers and schools form safe, inclusive

AUGUST

SUN SEPT 12 • 7PM

BOOK PARTY: MICHAEL PARENTI, GOD AND HIS DEMONS. Michael Parenti will discuss his latest book, which examines the many evils committed in the name of godly virtue throughout history.

Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15

WED SEPT 15 • 7:30PM

FORUM: HOW DOES THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM CONTRIBUTE TO BUILDING A NEW PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT IN THE U.S.? Organizers from the Brecht Forum, the Left Forum, and the U.S. Social Forum will discuss how the USSF contributes to advance a convergence of fragmented social movements.

Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15

MON SEPT 20 • 7:30PM

BOOK PARTY/FORUM: TARIQ ALI, THE OBAMA SYNDROME. Join Tariq Ali, Rick MacArthur and Frances Fox Piven in a discussion of what has really changed since Bush left the White House.

Sliding scale: \$6/\$10/\$15

FOR INFORMATION AND TICKET RESERVATIONS

brechforum.org
or 212-242-4201

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE BRECHT FORUM

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

THAT MOVES

451 West Street (btw Bank and Bethune)

environments that support individual differences of identity and self-expression.

Please bring a photo ID.

CUNY Graduate Center

365 Fifth Ave, Rm 5414

nyqueer@nycore.org • nycore.org/get-involved/nyqueer

TUE OCT 7

All day • Free

DAY OF ACTION: NATIONAL ACTIONS TO DEFEND PUBLIC EDUCATION. Join

education activists for a national day of action for public education. Organizers are calling on students, teachers, faculty, staff, workers and parents to come together to defend public education.

defendcapubliceducation.wordpress.com

SIGN UP TO RECEIVE OUR WEEKLY ONLINE CALENDAR VIA EMAIL AT INDYPENDENT.ORG.

WHERE DO I GET MY COPY OF THE INDYPENDENT?

14TH TO 96TH ST.

14TH TO 96TH ST.

Jefferson Market Library

6th Ave & 10th St.

Chelsea Square Restaurant

23rd St. & 9th Ave

Manhattan Neighborhood Network

537 W. 59th St.

Housing Conservation Coordinators

777 Tenth Ave.

Domus Furniture

413 W. 44th St.

New York Public Library

Muhlenberg Branch

209 W. 23rd St.

BAM

30 Lafayette Ave.

Vox Pop

The Indypendent was launched 10 years ago this month to give voice to grassroots social justice movements here in New York and around the world. As millions of children return to school, we dedicate this special issue to bringing forward the experiences

and insights of parents, teachers, students and community activists who are rarely heard from in what, to date, has been a one-sided debate over the future of public education; a debate dominated by the wealthy and the powerful.

LOCAL

LOOKING BEYOND MAYORAL CONTROL

BY JOHN TARLETON

On Aug. 16, almost three weeks after state education authorities revealed that student test score results were inflated, a Brooklyn mother of four school-age children stepped up to the microphone at the meeting of the Panel for Educational Policy. She demanded to know how city school officials planned to help tens of thousands of students now considered non-proficient in English and math. The chairperson ruled Zakiyah Ansari out of order and told her to wait until the end of the meeting to raise her concerns.

His rebuff sparked a raucous protest from about 80 other parents, students and teachers who'd just sat through a droning presentation that ignored their concerns. Unable to subdue the crowd, the board members fled from the stage. Members of the audience gathered at the front of the auditorium to voice their frustrations.

"Where is the support for our schools, our principals, our teachers? Where is it?" Ansari asked. "Our kids are dying literally in the street for lack of education."

"You failed my son and all of our children in New York," added Esperanza Vasquez, a mother of two from the Bronx. Her son, who is entering ninth grade, had received a top ranking on the state's standardized tests last year, but discovered he needed to take remedial classes after winning a scholarship to a Catholic school this year.

The confrontation suggests that Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein's experiment in running New York City's schools like a business will face increasingly aggressive opposition from an array of groups.

While some advocates question whether the city's standardized test scores ever reflected actual learning, Josh Karan, a longtime community school activist in Washington Heights thinks the test-score revelations could catalyze a deeper public rejection of the status quo.

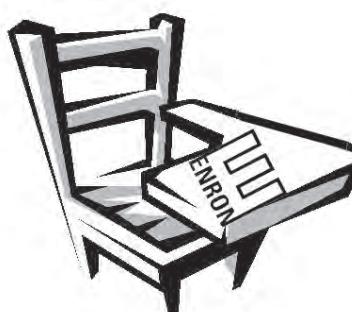
"It's the equivalent of Toto pulling the curtain from the Wizard of Oz and revealing that it's been a bunch of tired old men who have been pretending to be wizards for the last eight years," said Karan. "It gives us an opportunity that hasn't existed for a long, long time."

The Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), which led the shutdown of the Aug. 16 school-board meeting, is preparing a broad-based campaign to push the city's Department of



PARENT POWER: Zakiyah Ansari, mother of four school-aged children and a member of the Coalition for Educational Justice, speaks out at the Aug. 16 meeting of the Panel for Education Policy. PHOTO: SAKURA KELLEY

Enron in the Classroom



New York City rates students in third to eighth grade on a scale of 1 to 4 on state tests, with 1 being the lowest level and 3 being "proficient," or passing. For years, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his schools chancellor, Joel Klein, have touted steadily rising test scores. At the height of the test-score bubble in 2009, Bloomberg trumpeted the results to persuade the state Legislature to renew mayoral control of the city's public schools for another six years and to help himself to a narrow re-election victory. This summer, the state Department of Education announced that test-score results from previous years had been inflated. When it reset the bar for passing the test, New York City's education miracle vanished.

—J.T.

Education (DOE) to address problems highlighted by the test-score revelations. Drawing on alliances with unions, youth groups, community-based organizations and elected officials, CEJ will launch the campaign Sept. 16 with a rally and press conference outside the DOE's headquarters in lower Manhattan.

CEJ and its allies are calling on the DOE to provide more resources for struggling students and schools and not to base any more high-stakes decisions (such as closing schools) on standardized test scores.

While CEJ pursues incremental reforms, others insist that mayoral control has to be directly challenged, either through a forcing Klein to resign or pushing the State Legislature to revisit the mayoral-control law. That law, renewed in 2009, doesn't expire until 2015.

While there has been a flurry of meetings and discussions, no clear strategy for how to confront mayoral control has emerged. Julie Cavanagh, a teacher of ten years at P.S. 15 in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and a member of the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), said she expects things to pick up once the school year gets under way.

"We want to work smart as opposed to doing something for the sake of doing it," Cavanagh said.

Groups such as GEM and the Coalition for

Public Education/Coalición por la Educación Pública (CPE/CEP) are organizing school-based committees or councils that empower parents, teachers and community members to advocate for their schools. Only a handful of such organizations exist, but activists envision them as building blocks for a long-term struggle to bring the school system under community control.

"Parents, teachers, and community members will have more than just a seat at the table. They will have a strong organizational model that lends itself to greater autonomy and decision-making power when it comes to their schools and their communities," Cavanagh said.

CPE, which is rooted in communities of color, is pursuing a multi-year campaign to transform the school system. It is looking to develop parent/community councils at individual schools and elect a broad-based "People's School Board" that they believe would have more legitimacy than the current school board, whose majority was appointed by Bloomberg. They also want to see the current school system remade so it can better serve the needs of black and Latino children.

"A small number of students are doing well," said CPE co-chair Akinlabi Mackall. "But an unforgivably large number are not. We want to change that."

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

2009: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards: **69**
2010: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards: **42**
2009: Number of students at Level 1 in English the lowest level: **13,000**
2010: Number of students at Level 1 in English: **63,000**
2010: Percentage of black and Latino students who met state standards in English: **33 and 34**, respectively
2010: Percentage of white students who met state standards in English: **64**
2010: Racial achievement gap: **31 and 30 percentage points**

MATH

2009: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards in math: **82**
2010: Percentage of NYC students who met state standards: **54**
2009: Percentage of students who scored at Level 1: **3**
2010: Percentage of students who scored at Level 1: **11**
2009: Percentage of English-language learners who met state standards: **68**
2010: Percentage of English-language learners who met state standards: **32**
2009: Percentage of special-education students who met state standards: **55**
2010: Percentage of special-education students who met state standards: **24**
2010: Percentage of black and Latino students who met state standards: **40 and 46**, respectively
2010: Percentage of white students who met state standards: **75**
2010: Racial achievement gap: **35 and 29 percentage points**

Source: NYC Department of Education

Tested to the Limit

BY ARTHUR GOLDSTEIN

"I try my darndest to seduce kids into a love of learning that will benefit them everywhere they go."

The new teacher rating system makes me nervous. In a few years, I can get fired because of student test scores. Now that U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wants to print our names and scores in newspapers, I'm even more nervous. Maybe next he'll bring back the stocks.

Actually, that's not what worries me most. I've taught English as a Second Language (ESL) students how to pass the English Regents (a test that does not measure what they really need to know), and I already know how to raise test scores. I make kids practice until they're blue in the face. I show them how to pass, and if they don't understand, I show them again. In fact, I show them each and every day until and unless their fingers fall from their hands. I hear people wish to pay extra for such services.

I could take the money and dispense with things like group work. Though it's what my students need most, I could also drop things like language structure and oral communication in English. If it weren't on the test, it wouldn't exist.

It's not ideal, but if test scores are all that matter, you have to make adjustments. Researcher Donald T. Campbell identifies a significant sacrifice in what he calls Campbell's Law:

"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt

the social processes it is intended to monitor."

So, as tests become more and more important, we'll see not only increased corruption, but also less reliable test scores.

Perhaps we've already seen this at work in New York. After years of apparent miracles (largely contradicted by National Assessment for Educational Progress scores), the state has finally confirmed that its standards were unacceptably low. And though the gains were largely illusory, plenty of people managed to benefit anyway.

The inflated scores shouldn't have been news. Diana Senechal took the sixth grade test a year ago without reading the questions, checking A, B, C, D over and over, and scored level two — meriting promotion. Diane Ravitch has been questioning these tests for years. Yet, until very recently, those questioning the gains were a distinct minority.

Who dumbed down the tests, and why? Was it a quirk? Was it coincidence? That's hard to believe, and with increased emphasis on scores, things are likely to get worse before they get better.

In New York City, we're already pressured to pass as many kids as possible. I attended a faculty meeting with teachers and administrators where we explored ways to achieve this. Suggestions included letting kids bring cheat sheets, pairing low-scoring kids with high-scoring kids during tests, and simply letting kids take tests over after they'd been reviewed. Doubtless these methods would raise grades. If we're going that route, we may as well go all the way.

We could ignore kids who have answers on their water-bottle wrappers and cell phones. We could overlook signaling via taps, whistles, coughs, hand signals and all the other increasingly sophisticated cheats high-stakes tests inspire. Personally, I don't like cheating, and I discourage it to the best of my ability.

Perhaps I'm a relic, as I value not only test scores, but other things as well. I'm a role model — I have a job, I support a family and I provide an indispensable service. When kids have problems, I find time for them. I call parents and try to work with them to steer their kids in a more productive direction. Also, I try my darndest to seduce kids into a love of reading and a love of learning that will benefit them everywhere they go — not simply on a single test. Sometimes kids say, "Thank you, Mr. Goldstein, for making me read my first entire book in English." There are few words more gratifying than those.

When our jobs hinge on test scores, we'll have less time for such things. We'll cultivate a laser-like focus or fall by the wayside. Forget about inspiring kids — scores will be all that matter. I don't want my kid, or yours, in classes like that. I don't want to teach like that, either.

But hey, put a gun to my head, and I'll give you exactly what you want.

Arthur Goldstein teaches ESL at Francis Lewis High School in Queens.

Learning the 3C's: Competition, Corruption & Cheating

7 blogs to follow:

ED NOTES

ednotesonline.blogspot.com

Meet Norm Scott — a retired, 35-year New York City school teacher with a gift for gab and a keen knowledge of the workings of both the Department of Education and the UFT.

NYC EDUCATOR

nyceducator.com

Witty, thoughtful posts on a variety of school-related topics.

NYC PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENT

nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com

Razor-sharp analysis on New York City education issues.

DIANE RAVITCH & DEBORAH MEIER

blogs.edweek.org/edweek/

Bridging-Differences

A thoughtful, ongoing discussion/debate between two prominent veterans of the education wars.

PERDIDO ST.

perdidostreetschool.blogspot.com

Keeps an eye on important national education issues and trends.

SUBSTANCE NEWS

substancenews.net

Steady on-the-ground coverage of the Chicago school wars and the union-led fight-back.

EDWIZE

edwize.org

Lots of links to interesting teacher blogs can be found on this UFT-sponsored website.

An Absence of Curiosity

BY LUCAS HILDERBRAND

I teach at a prestigious public university where the average high school G.P.A. for incoming freshmen is over 4.0. But I find time and again that a majority of students don't know how to think for themselves, read texts or write grammatically correct sentences.

By the time students enter college, it's often too late to teach them the fundamentals of grammar and sentence structure or to ignite an overall sense of intellectual curiosity. These are things that should have been fostered in K-12, and as far as I can tell, they aren't. Teaching to the test systematically strips students of the ability to think critically. Anything that doesn't factor into the final grade isn't worth pondering.

I teach in the humanities, where original ideas, complex interpretations and effective expression are the goals. There are disciplines in which standardized testing can measure specific knowledge or where professional cer-

tification is contingent upon passing an exam. In contrast, an understanding of the humanities cannot be measured by this testing model. That may make the humanities more difficult to rationalize, but that is the point. The humanities help us to think through the things that make life rich and understand that social relations are too complex to be reduced to multiple-choice answers.

The most common complaints I hear from other university-level teachers is that students don't read and can't write. Having grown up with the internet, they tend to skim readings as onscreen PDFs but have difficulty finding the central argument or supporting evidence of an essay.

The writing that students do is almost universally formulaic, and I find that students are uncomfortable breaking out of the generalizing and banal template they've been taught. Schools are embracing digital learning tools, but now students assume everything they need to know can be Googled. They learn how to write without a voice. This reflects the lack of deep thinking. But I don't blame the students. This is a systemic problem. We need to stop teaching how to pass a test and begin teaching our K-12 stu-

dents how to think.

The effect of the testing regime can also be found in the student query I dislike the most: "What do I have to do to get an A?" This question demonstrates a commitment to achieving a certain mark but no engagement with thinking. And it leads many students to challenge their final grades, displaying a strong sense of entitlement as if they were customers. There has always been a degree of entitlement, particularly at elite schools, and even public universities are privatizing and connected to the market. But to see learning approached like shopping is worrisome. It always disappoints me when students don't care as much about learning as I do about teaching.

Today's students, coddled and complacent, have learned to study for tests but not to question the significance of the answers or search for context. Few value innovation or display intellectual curiosity. If our students do not learn to question the information they are given, we are in serious trouble.

Lucas Hilderbrand is assistant professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Irvine.



JENNIFER LEW

AN EDUCATION AT ANY AGE

A BOY FROM BAGHDAD AND HIS PARENTS NAVIGATE DIFFERENT ENDS OF THE NYC SCHOOL SYSTEM

BY DAVID ENDERS

My stepson Yousif is 12 years old. He arrived from Baghdad to New York City in February 2009. He had been in the public school system for less than a week when the counselor at P.S. 163 in the Bronx suggested he should be placed in special education. She was fully aware he did not speak English.

Yousif shouldn't have been at P.S. 163 in the first place. It was our zoned school, but the New York City Department of Education (DOE) is supposed to provide "transitional bilingual education programs" (TBE) for newly arrived students. For the six months before Yousif arrived, I had left phone messages with and sent emails to the English Language Learners office in the Bronx, trying to find out where the site for Arabic speakers was locat-

— suffers from serious problems. It was supposed to be a flagship for the DOE's network of small, specialized learning communities, in this case, for Arabic speakers. But recently immigrated Arab students clashed with neighborhood kids from the projects and each other. And the school fell far short of its initial goal of having a student body of 50 percent Arabic speakers as it was moved from Park Slope to DUMBO. There was only one staff member who spoke Arabic. Yousif's mother and I both found ourselves translating for school staff in disciplinary situations.

After two months of asking to observe a class, we were allowed to sit in one November morning, but only with the principal present. In Yousif's first-period class, half the students had nothing to write with, and the school's staff struck me as well-meaning but overwhelmed. Despite the presence of five adults, including the principal, in the room, students were still getting out of their seats to fight over the few pens and pencils to be had.

Meanwhile, in Harlem, I was in my third year as a well-meaning but often overwhelmed staff member at Frederick Douglass Academy (FDA), one of the last of the city's large schools. FDA has nearly 1,500 students in grades 6-12. Despite the campaign by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein to break large schools up into smaller ones, it has survived because of its reputation for being an oasis of discipline and scholarship in a neighborhood where students are notoriously unmanageable. In the three years I worked at FDA, a handful of students went on to the Ivy League, a major accomplishment at a Title I school (typically, around 40 percent or more students in Title I schools come from low-income families).

In the 1990s, the school and its founding principal, Lorraine Monroe, were featured on *60 Minutes*. Dr. Gregory Hodge, the school's current principal, has been lauded for his success in educating young black males, and especially for its 100 percent graduation rate. He's been written up in *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine as a brilliant champion of children. When a professor suggested I apply to FDA, I did so without hesitation — it sounded like a great place to work. Like KGIA, the reality was something different. By the end of last school year, I found myself in a school that seemed to be falling apart. Initially I thought I was overreacting, but as teachers with 10 years or more in the school began complaining that things had "never been like this," I realized that in my three years at FDA I had witnessed the undoing of a school.

"In Yousif's first-period class, half the students had nothing to write with and the staff struck me as overwhelmed."

ed. It was only after Yousif was in the United States and enrolled that I was able to schedule a meeting with the district English Language Learners representative.

Finally, I understood why she hadn't returned my calls. There was no TBE site anywhere in the city, for elementary school pupils who speak Arabic. Nonetheless, the TBE website at the time described programs available for 15 different languages. In order to have a TBE program for any given language, the DOE had to identify 15 native speakers of the language living in proximity to one another. I noticed that for the 2009-10 school year a detailed list of TBE sites was available on the DOE website, something that would have helped immensely the previous year.

While most students in Yousif's situation don't have anyone to advocate for them, he is fortunate because I am a teacher in the public schools. Nonetheless, the best I could do was to move with my family to Brooklyn, where there is a public middle school that offers some Arabic language instruction.

However, Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA) — which barely opened three years ago after right-wing groups condemned it as a publicly funded "madrassa"

Continued on page 18

PUBLIC EDUCATION IS UNDER ASSAULT

THE GLOBAL ASSAULT ON TEACHING, TEACHERS, AND THEIR UNIONS

Stories for Resistance

EDITED BY
MARY COMPTON
AND LOIS WEINER

THE GLOBAL ASSAULT
ON TEACHING, TEACHERS,
AND THEIR UNIONS

Stories for Resistance

Edited by Mary Compton and Lois Weiner

Mary Compton and Lois Weiner explain why such profound and damaging changes are being made to schools and teaching, and how teachers, their unions, and supporters of public education can restore the goal of quality education for all the world's children.



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www.palgrave-usa.com

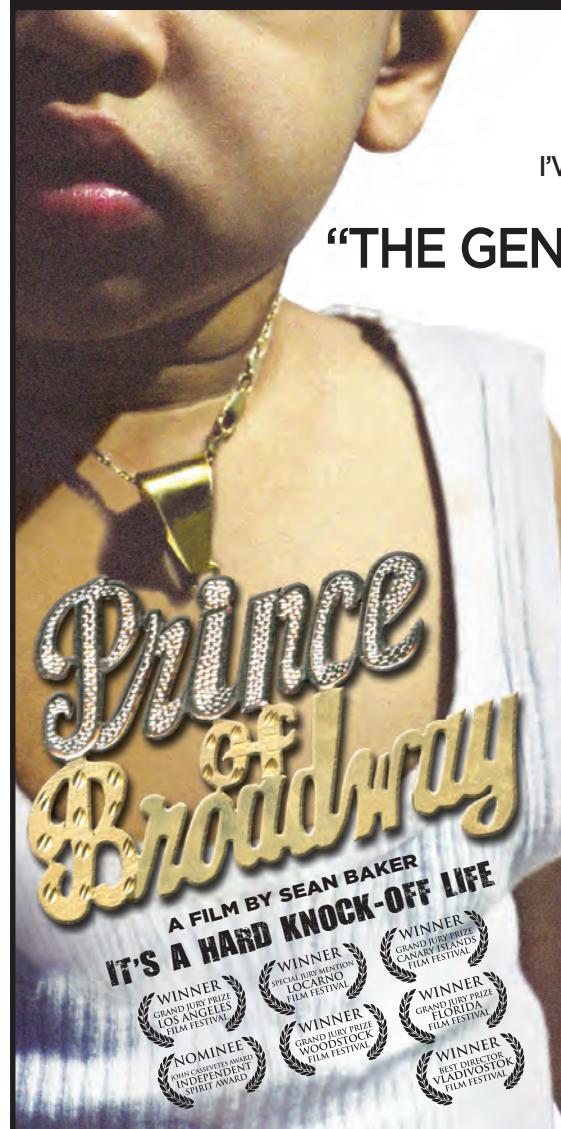
LEE DANIELS PRESENTS

"THE SHINIEST INDIE GEM
I'VE FOUND SO FAR THIS YEAR!"
- Eric Campos, FILM THREAT

"THE GENUINE ARTICLE!"
- Justin Lowe, THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

"STREETWISE AND SOLIDLY DRAMATIC!"
- John Anderson, VARIETY

"BAKER IS CREATING A VISUAL HISTORY OF NEW YORK CITY THAT WILL ONE DAY STAND WITH SCORSESE'S EFFORTS."
- Jason Sanders, FILMMAKER MAGAZINE



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& MERCER ST 800-FANDANGO #2707

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SEAN BAKER, DARREN DEAN & CAST FRI. 9/3.
Q&A WITH FILMMAKERS SEAN BAKER
AND DARREN DEAN SAT 9/4 - THURS. 9/9

WWW.PRINCEOFBROADWAY.COM

Why Teacher Unions Matter

By Lois Weiner

When I speak to parent groups about the neoliberal push to destroy public education and teacher unions, I am often asked how I can support these unions when they defend bad teachers. The question shows how far public discussion has been hijacked by conservatives, because teacher unions are essential to democratic schools.

They support the right of teachers to be presumed innocent and to have impartial hearings based on objective evidence of wrongdoing. For every horror story about an incompetent teacher, teacher unions can produce examples of teachers whose reputations, careers and lives would be ruined by what turned out to be false accusations, political discrimination or prejudice.

So union contracts and tenure provisions actually protect the uncensored exchange of ideas in classrooms. Free people need teachers who do not fear speaking truth and defending what they see as being best for kids.

BEHIND THE TEACHER BASHING

Education is one of the few sectors of the economy that is thoroughly unionized, and teacher

unions are the best organized, most stable institutions blocking the neoliberal agenda to transform education. This is because unions' principles of solidarity and collective action counteract the selfishness and competitiveness that "free-market" ideologues say are essential for economic progress.

Strikingly similar exposés about how teacher unions protect malevolent, incompetent teachers are prominent in media outlets all over the world.

In the United States, far-right think tanks, like the American Enterprise Institute and the Manhattan Institute, finance lavish, well-orchestrated campaigns that stoke legitimate parent concerns about teacher quality in order to weaken teacher unions. The think tanks promote the assumption that charter schools, privatization and standardized testing will increase educational attainment and equalize opportunity by helping all students be competitive for well-paid jobs. What is chilling is that these far-right ideas have been adopted by the Obama administration and many mainstream Democrats.

Elsewhere in the world these same reforms, imposed by the World Bank as a condition for loans and aid, are justified quite differently. In its report, "Making Services

Work for Poor People," the World Bank lays out its rationale for a new economic order and a system of public education that serves it, all of which depends on weakening teacher unions:

1. Workers in every country must compete with those elsewhere for jobs, most of which require little education.

require little education.

2. Public money spent on creating a highly educated workforce is therefore wasted because most people don't need much schooling.

cause most people don't need much schooling.

3. A professional teaching force is unnecessary and a waste of public spending. The only learning that counts can be measured in standardized tests.

4. Teacher unions are the primary barriers to governments carrying out this agenda of transforming education.

STAGNANT UNIONS

Teachers in the United States are represented by two national unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Both need to be revitalized, democratized and pushed to be social movements that fight for justice and democracy in schools.

Many teachers who believed that "politics" were not their concern now see that their pro-

fessional ideals and livelihoods are at risk. The economic collapse and resulting budget crisis, combined with the vicious attacks by politicians and media, have spurred them to ask why their unions are not more active in defending teachers and their schools.

CORE BELIEFS

Perhaps the most important illustration of what can occur when teachers realize they need to "own" their union occurred this June with the Chicago Teachers Union.

The Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), a group that includes many experienced social justice activists, defeated the union's old guard in a hard-fought election. Close to two-thirds of union members voted, giving CORE a resounding victory in the election runoff. As one caucus member explained, "CORE's win was the result of organizing. We energized the grassroots."

organizing. We energized the grassroots. CORE's victory means the Chicago union has leaders who are committed to mobilizing teachers and working with parents to restore community school councils. They also want to overturn mayoral control, halt school closings, end standardized testing's stranglehold on the curriculum and fight against merit pay linked to test scores.



Democratic unions and tenure protect the free exchange of ideas in the classroom

CORE's victory in Chicago follows the success of a reform coalition in the merged AFT/NEA local in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Detroit teachers have also elected a reform group. These victories indicate that neoliberal reforms can be a spark for successful organizing.

When I met CORE leaders in May, I was struck by the way they describe their work. Karen Lewis, the newly elected union president, told teachers that the group's opposition to standardized testing resonated with teachers who feel "the joy has been taken from teaching." Its activists refer to their students as "my kids" — a hallmark of teachers who care deeply about their students' well-being. Many see their union work as the logical extension of their commitment to teach for and about social justice.

Race, class and social differences between teachers and parents can make alliances difficult to sustain. Communities of color have never been provided with quality schools. But CORE and community activists have worked hard at maintaining a respectful relationship, a process aided by the group's multiracial membership and explicit commitment to ending inequality and racism in education.

PARENT-TEACHER ALLIANCES

For New Yorkers familiar with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), building a progressive teacher union may sound like an oxymoron.

This AFT affiliate, which represents 87,000 teachers, is skewered by the media as being too powerful. But for teachers seeking protection against capricious, educationally destructive and downright inhumane treatment at the hands of supervisors — at all levels of the school system — the UFT is little more than a dues-collecting machine. It is weak to the point of being nonexistent and oppressively bureaucratic in its own operations.

The UFT in its present state has neither the vocabulary nor the will to organize its members, parents and community activists to defend a system of public education that will provide New York's kids with well-funded, well-run, socially and racially integrated schools. Its modus operandus is making backroom deals with New York's notoriously corrupt politicians. But in the process of winning small economic gains, the UFT ignores the need to address issues like testing, which significantly affect teachers' working conditions, such as seniority



PUSHING BACK: Karen Lewis, the newly elected president of the Chicago Teachers Union.
PHOTO: LABORBEAT.ORG

and students' learning ability.

Despite the shortcomings of locals like the UFT, it's important to understand how teacher unions can be potential allies for parent and community activists. They have stability, institutional roots and political clout. But union leadership is not synonymous with union members. The strongest alliances start at the grassroots level, with common struggle over issues that are meaningful for all of a school's constituencies.

*Lois Weiner is the co-editor with Mary Compton of *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions*. She taught high school in the New York City schools for nine years and is now a professor of education at New Jersey City University. She can be contacted at lweiner@njcu.edu.*

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COMMUNITY VOICES

Parents Speaking Out

AFTER BEING IGNORED FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, MANY NEW YORK CITY PARENTS ARE INCREASINGLY RESTLESS WITH A SCHOOL SYSTEM IN WHICH THEY HAVE MINIMAL INFLUENCE. HERE ARE FOUR OF THEIR STORIES.

INTERVIEWS BY JOHN TARLETON

MARK TORRES



I think the public sector can work if you have proper accountability, which means that the people receiving the services are the ones in control of the services being provided, who's hired and who's providing the services. When you leave it up to politicians, they can be bought by their campaign contributors. Politicians are like a barrel of rotten apples and you have to try and find a good apple.

In the schools, the parents are totally shut out. Parents have to deal with all sorts of subterfuge: the leadership of the UFT (United Federation of Teachers), the Department of Education, and on top of that people running around who want to get grants funded to speak for parents.

If you look at the chancellor's regulations, special ed laws, you have to be a lawyer to understand all these things. They make it especially hard for parents to navigate the system. But if parents work collectively, join CPE/CEP, and demand what their children need, they're going to be a lot more successful.

JESSICA SANTOS

Jessica Santos knows the power one parent can have, even under the current system of mayoral control. Since 2009 she and other parents of 40 autistic children at P.S. 94 in the Lower East Side have been fighting and winning against the DOE's efforts to phase out their presence in the building they share with P.S. 188 near East Houston and Avenue D in order to pave the way for the expansion of a politically connected charter school. In early August, Chancellor Joel Klein invoked his emergency powers to overrule a state order rejecting the city's plan to expand Girls Prep's presence inside P.S. 94/188. Days later he rescinded his edict following an outpouring of support for P.S. 94 from local elected officials, some of whom have been strong supporters of mayoral control.

It all started Dec. 8. I was notified by John Englert of the City Council on Special Ed-

uation (CCSE) of a proposal to expand Girls Prep Charter School inside our school and phase us out. This was two days prior to when our opinion was supposed to be submitted. I notified the parents through a letter I composed that same night. We held an emergency parent meeting the very next day. I composed the letter of reply. We didn't have all the information regarding the proposals, as there were four at that time. We



were upset that our kids were going to be moved into buildings where we never even were given a chance to do a walk through.

Our students are in the fourth through eighth grade and their classrooms are located on the fifth floor of the P.S. 188 building. My son starts the fifth grade this year. He receives speech therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy twice a week, which has helped him drastically improve his motor and socialization skills and become more independent.

We didn't have the money for PR to do what Girls Prep was doing, holding all these press conferences at City Hall and putting

Seven Groups Putting the Public Back in Education

COALITION FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION/ COALICION POR LA EDUCACION PUBLICA (CPE/CEP)

Formed during the 2009 campaign against reauthorizing mayoral control of New York City's public schools, the Coalition for Public Education/Coalición por la Educación Pública focuses on building human rights-based education system and society. The coalition also looks to work with other groups and individuals fighting for social justice and against poverty, racism, sexism, class oppression, police brutality and war. For more, email cpe-cep@hotmail.com or call 212-348-5732. Website: forpubliced.blogspot.com.

GRASSROOTS EDUCATION MOVEMENT (GEM)

Last winter GEM helped spark raucous protests against Mayor Bloomberg's plans to close 21 public schools. Since then it has assisted in building school-based committees and mobilizing educators, parents and students to fight back against destructive corporate and governmental policies. GEM works both within and outside the United Federation of Teachers, publishes a bimonthly newsletter and holds community forums on topics such as the growth of the charter school industry. Website: grassrootseducationmovement.blogspot.com

WEB EXCLUSIVE

In spite of mayoral control, parents can still participate ... and agitate for their kids from within the school system. See our parents' guide to school involvement only on indypendent.org.

out articles and advertisements in the papers. Our parents are a small group. Without the mobilization of other parents and supporters, it probably would have been a lost cause.

I'm grateful that a lot of elected officials came to our defense recently when the chancellor tried to invoke his "emergency powers" to overrule a state order preventing Girls Prep from expanding further in our building. They are starting to see the abuse of power that has gone on for some time now. Ever since mayoral control was established, they do whatever they please without regard to process or parental involvement or any consideration towards kids - and not just special needs kids.

I'm pretty sure there's gonna be a lot more upset parents sooner or later. It's about time we start mobilizing and realizing that something needs to get done. Too many of our kids are failing or are falling behind.

MONA DAVIDS

Mona Davids, along with her fellow parents at Co-op City in the Bronx, fought a bruising battle 18 months ago to bring a charter school into an already existing public school. She hoped that the new school would provide her sixth-grade daughter a better education. However, "all that glitters is not gold," as she told The Indypendent. In 2009, the 35-year-old businesswoman founded the New York Charter Parents Association, the first and only independent charter parent association in the city, becoming a leading advocate for the rights of the city's 45,000 charter school parents and a constant thorn in the side of the charter school industry.

My daughter loves her school and her teachers. However, the school has had some serious growing pains, and if there was more support and oversight from the DOE my school wouldn't be having the problems that it's having. We had a 21 percent student attrition rate during the school's first year. Parents have withdrawn their kids from our school due to a lack of textbooks, bullying and their special needs children's Individualized Education Plan's not being met. Charter leaders' response when parents have concerns is, "If you don't like it, take your child out."

Charters are the new gold rush for busi-

ness because there is zero investment and a guaranteed revenue stream, which is our kids. I would have to say about 30 percent of the charters here in the city are honest. The other 70 percent have issues.

When I entered charter land, I was shocked to find out that we don't have parent associations. Ninety-nine percent of parents have no idea that a charter school is governed by the charter that the school's founders laid out



COURTESY OF MONA DAVIDS

for what type of curriculum they're going to have, the disciplinary and hiring policies and so on. When parents ask for the charter, the schools respond through their attorneys telling the parents, "Okay, we'll give it to you and because it's a public document we will charge you 25 cents a page" for the charter and the bylaws, which run anywhere from 600 to 1,200 pages.

Charter board meetings can be hard to access too, since they are held at the homes or places of business of board members. We have had instances where parents would show up at the board member's beautiful luxury condominium and be denied entrance by the doorman. That's how ridiculous it got.

This spring we won some charter reforms in Albany. State legislators were completely shocked when they met our parents. It was the first time any charter parent had visited them

who wasn't working from a script that only spoke about more funding and raising the cap on the number of charters in New York.

Now, charters can no longer turn away special education and English Language Learner kids. Board meetings have to be held at the school. And we won the right to have independent Parent Associations, but only at schools in New York City. According to the law, the chancellor is supposed to notify charter school leaders of our new rights and set up the regulations governing the PAs but so far he has not acted.

The charter lobby and many school leaders vehemently opposed our charter reforms and continue to undermine our efforts to hold charters accountable to the public and the parents.

At the end of the day, it's really important for us that district and charter parents know the pros and cons about charters.

The next monthly meeting of the New York Charter Parents Association will be September 30 at 6:00 pm at Brooklyn Borough Hall. For more, see nycharterparents.org.

LISA DONLAN

In the aftermath of New York's 1970s-era meltdown, parents in School District 1 (CSD1) on the Lower East Side rallied to improve their struggling schools while preserving the community's diverse social fabric. Lisa Donlan got involved in 1995 when the first of her two children entered pre-kindergarten and she joined the school PTA. Donlan was still active as PTA President in CSD1 (New York has a total of 32 school districts) in 2003 when she saw Mayor Bloomberg's new Schools Chancellor Joel Klein speak to a Lower East Side audience about his plans for transforming public education in New York.

Joel Klein came to P.S. 20, near the corner of Essex and Delancey, and he got up on stage and in so many words said, "Listen, what's been happening in New York City public schools is a disgrace and disaster. We've had corruption and inefficiency and just the worst kind of racism and I am here to be the voice for the voiceless. And so what I'm doing is I'm closing the school boards and I'm closing the district offices and I'm creating these new regions and it's gonna be centralized and standardized and we're imposing this curriculum."

And he got booted off the stage. A number of people emailed him. A few messages were exchanged but he basically just stopped listening. I didn't understand how you could come along and be so arrogant as to just undo 15 years of policy work that had been effective in a number of areas including expanding parental choice while creating more



racially integrated schools, and just undo it like that without knowing anything about what we're doing here.

Most of the reforms the DOE has proposed were just experiments with business models. It's voodoo economics applied to education by people who know nothing about education. They have these management theories and their attitude has been "Let's try it."

We have a very strong sense of community in District 1 that hasn't been destroyed by these neoliberal reforms but it has been chipped away at. Each school is now considered a stand-alone fiefdom. There's a spirit of competition, competition for resources, rooms, space, students, the dollars that come with students and on and on and on. So rather than a community coming together and saying, "Well, what do we do about there not being enough resources?" it is each school for itself.

Lisa Donlan is currently the President of Community Education Council 1, which represents parents at 31 schools in the Lower East Side and East Village.

COALITION FOR EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE (CEJ)

Led by parents, the foundation-funded Coalition for Educational Justice works to reduce inequities in the city's public school system. CEJ collaborates with unions and established community-based organizations such as Make the Road by Walking, whose members include culturally diverse parents, community members, students and educators. CEJ is the largest parent-led advocacy group in New York City. Website: nyccej.org.

INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY OF EDUCATORS (ICE)

ICE is a caucus within the UFT opposing the ruling Unity Caucus. Its members have organized and/or participated in demonstrations support-

ing excessed teachers and against mayoral control, closing schools and the last two contracts in which the union leadership has ceded ground on a number of key rights. Knowledgeable and experienced union leaders in ICE are willing to assist colleagues when asked for help. Phone: 917-992-3734. Website: www.ice-uft.org.

TEACHERS FOR A JUST CONTRACT (TJC)

Teachers for a Just Contract is a group of chapter leaders, delegates and rank-and-file activists who have been organizing and disseminating information to UFT members since the early 1990s and who campaigned against the 2005 contract agreement reached by the union's leadership. To receive email updates from TJC, send your name, non-DOE email address, school and borough to JustContractUFT@aol.com or call in that info to 212-831-

3408. Website: teachersforajustcontract.org.

TEACHERS UNITE

Teachers Unite is a membership organization of public school educators building power to demand that the UFT stand for educational justice and to win social justice demands for low-income and working communities of New York City. This fall, Teachers Unite kicks off its Leadership Program for teachers who want to bring progressive change to the union and bring democracy to our schools. Get involved in making real change to New York City's educational landscape while working in partnership with community organizations. To sign up for TU's low-traffic listserv, go to teachersunite.net/supporter.

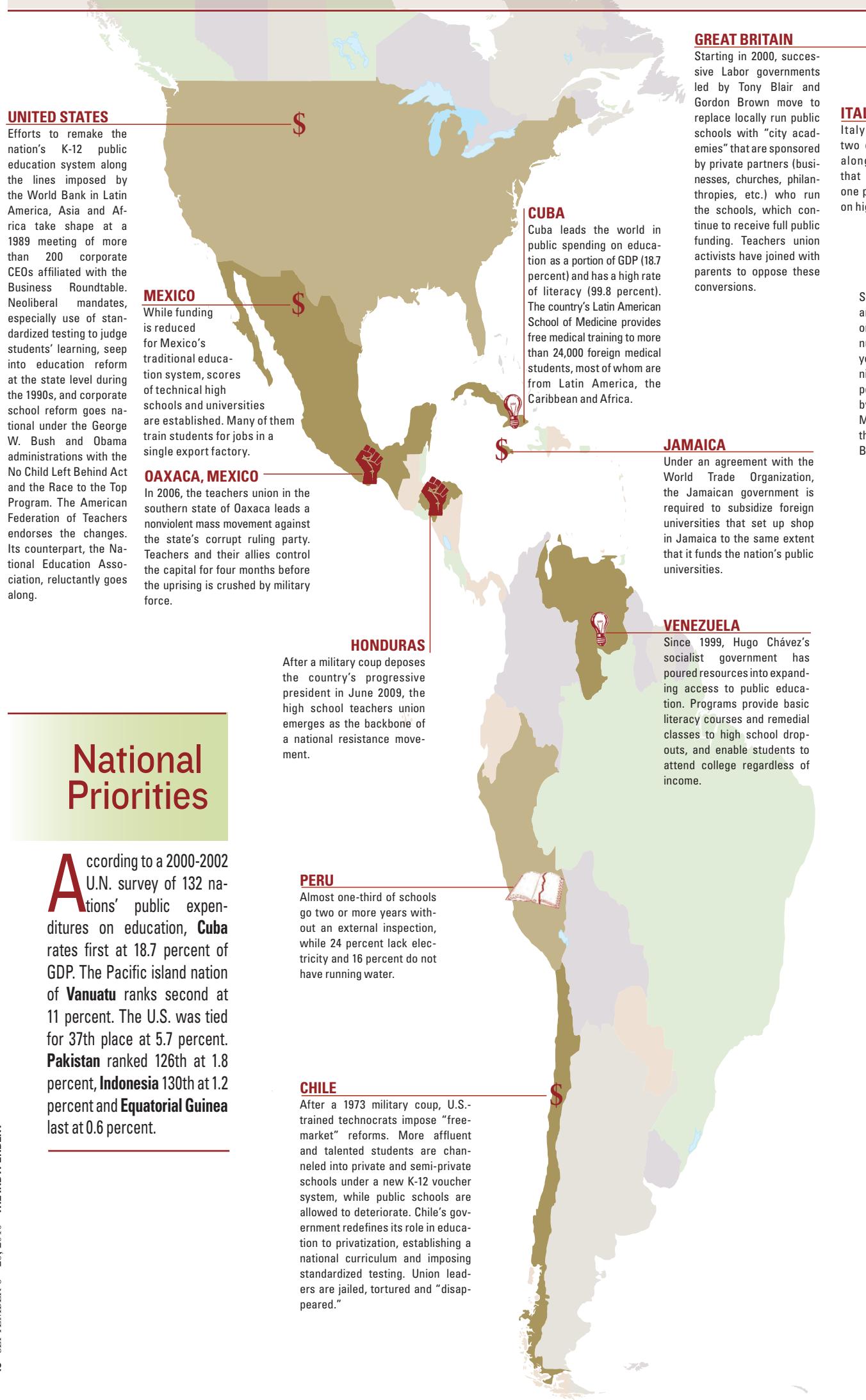
NEW YORK COLLECTIVE OF RADICAL EDUCATORS (NYCoRE)

New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) is a group of current and former public school educators committed to fighting for social justice in our school system and society at large, by organizing and mobilizing teachers, developing curricula and working with community, parent and student organizations. To get involved, attend NYCoRE's Oct. 1 meeting at NYU/82 Washington Sq./3rd fl. Press Lounge. RSVP at info@nycore.org. Website: nycore.org.

—INDYPENDENT STAFF

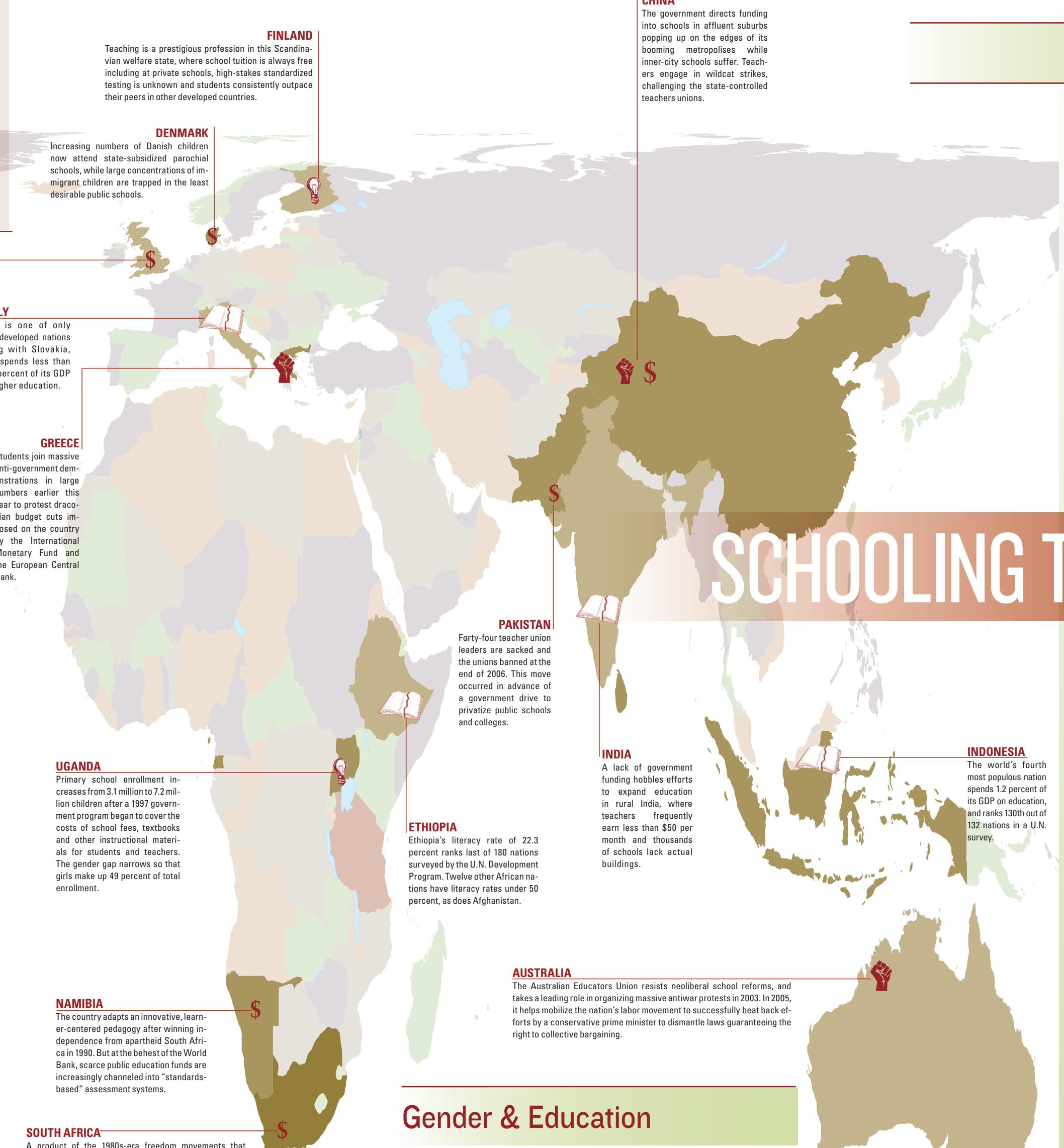
By John Tarleton

Public education in the United States has been transformed by an accelerating push for free-market, or neoliberal, reforms that tend to result in privatization. The shift in power means elites increasingly decide what is taught and who teaches. The global makeover of education from a public good to a private commodity actually began three decades ago, when the world's rich and powerful rallied around a new consensus for reshaping economies and schools. Teachers unions have posed the most serious obstacle against privatization and de-funding, and consequently have been the focus of virulent attacks.



National Priorities

According to a 2000-2002 U.N. survey of 132 nations' public expenditures on education, **Cuba** rates first at 18.7 percent of GDP. The Pacific island nation of **Vanuatu** ranks second at 11 percent. The U.S. was tied for 37th place at 5.7 percent. **Pakistan** ranked 126th at 1.8 percent, **Indonesia** 130th at 1.2 percent and **Equatorial Guinea** last at 0.6 percent.



Gender & Education

In many parts of the world, meager funding of public education leads to gender disparities as families decide to invest scarce resources in educating their sons. According to UNESCO, 112 nations have achieved gender parity in primary education enrollment. However, in 66 countries girls continue to lag behind boys in terms of enrollment, while boys have lower enrollments in only eight countries.

Class Struggle

Results from a 2008 UNESCO report on conditions in primary schools in 11 developing nations in **South America, North Africa and Asia** based on a survey of teachers and principals at 7,600 schools:

Percent of schools with **electricity**: 97
Percent of schools with **running water**: 87
Percent with sufficient **places to sit**: 87
Percent where students can borrow or take **books home**: 82
Percent of schools that have sufficient **toilets**: 70
Percent that have **libraries**: 64
Percent of students with access to **computer at school**: 57
Percent that have **cafeterias**: 36
Percent that have **audio-visual rooms**: 30
Percent that have **overhead projectors**: 29
Percent that have **science labs**: 26

SCHOOLING THE WORLD

Africa

The rate of primary school enrollment in Africa jumped from 39 percent in 1960 to 85 percent in 1982 as the continent's postcolonial governments invested heavily in education. These successes were reversed during the 1980s and 1990s, due in part to structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that led to deep cuts in education spending. Spending has begun to rebound in recent years, but according to the U.N. Human Development Program, sub-Saharan Africa spends only 2.4 percent of the world's public education resources despite having 15 percent of the world's school-age population.

North America & Western Europe

North American and Western European nations have less than 10 percent of the world's school-age population but account for 55.1 percent of education spending, meaning more than 30 times as much money is spent on the average school-aged individual in these countries than in Africa.

The Graduate

HUNTER HIGH STUDENT CALLS OUT SEGREGATED SYSTEM

New York City's public school system is frequently depicted as underperforming, failing or dysfunctional. But inside that larger system is an elite core of schools and programs segregated by race, class and ability. These include schools in better-off neighborhoods such as Riverdale, Park Slope, Bayside and the Upper West Side, "gifted and talented" programs inside of schools, and prestigious high schools like Stuyvesant and Hunter High School where entrance is decided by specialized admissions tests.

Justin Hudson saw this two-tier system up close at Hunter, where the percentage of students who are Black and Latino has declined from 12 and 6 percent, respectively, in 1995 to 3 and 1 percent in 2009. Hudson completed his studies at Hunter this past June and was selected to deliver a graduation speech that reflected on the school's lack of diversity. The following is excerpted from his speech. For the full version, go to indypendent.org/2010/9/8/graduation-speech.

BY JUSTIN HUDSON

Today, I stand before you as a personification of conflictedness. I feel guilty because I don't deserve any of this. And neither do any of you. We received an outstanding education at no charge based solely on our performance on a test we took when we were 11 year olds, or 4 year olds. We received superior teachers and additional resources based on our status as "gifted," while kids who naturally needed those resources much more than us wallowed in the mire of a broken system. And now, we stand on the precipice of our lives, in control of our lives, based purely and simply on luck and circumstance.

If you truly believe that the demographics of Hunter represent the distribution of intelligence in this city, then you must believe that the Upper West Side, Bayside and Flushing are intrinsically more intelligent than the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Washington Heights, and I refuse to accept that. It is certainly not Hunter's fault that socioeconomic factors inhibit the educational opportunities of some children from birth, and in some ways I forgive colleges and universities that are forced to review 18 year olds, the end results of a broken system. But, we are talking about 11 year olds. Four year olds. We are deciding children's fates before they even had a chance. We are playing God, and we are losing. Kids are losing the opportunity to go to college or obtain a career, because no one taught them long division or colors. Hunter is perpetuating a system in which children, who contain unbridled and untapped intellect and creativity, are discarded like refuse. And we have the audacity to say they deserved it, because we're smarter than them.

As students, we throw around empty platitudes like "deserve" and "earn," most likely because it makes us feel better about ourselves. However, it simply isn't the case. I know for a fact that I did not work as hard as I possibly could have, and I think the same is true for everyone on this stage. Nevertheless, people who work much harder than we ever could imagine will never have the opportunities that lie in front of us.

Let me make it very clear that I am not giving

anyone here a moral lecture, for I am as complicit in the system we are a part of as anyone else in this room. If anything, I only make these remarks to further emphasize how much Hunter has meant to me, because I am acutely aware of where I would be now without it. As recipients of fortune, we more than anyone else should be able to understand and respect what our high school experience has meant to us, and has done for us.

My guilt ultimately stems from my awareness of the academic, social, emotional and psychological tools that Hunter has blessed us with. Therefore, I believe the best way to assuage this guilt is to use those fortuitous tools to not only better myself, but also improve the society that surrounds us outside these oh-so narrow walls. I do not know the capacity in which I will be able to make this world a better and more just place, but I strongly believe that education is the most effective means of creating social improvement, which is precisely why this is a battle we cannot concede.

My experiences at Hunter have left me with one final emotion; the last sentiment I will share with you today is hope. I hope that I will use the tools that Hunter has given me as a means to provide opportunities to others, not out of a sense of paternalistic philanthropy, but out of a sense of duty to give to other people what Hunter has given to me. I also hope that you all will do the same, in whatever way you see fit. Even more so, I hope that in the near future, education itself will not be a privilege for the few in this world. I hope that a quality education will not be a privilege for the few in this country. I hope that the Hunter community will descend from its ivory tower made of brick, and distribute its tools evenly to the mass of humanity that is the City of New York. I hope that, despite its problems, Hunter can prove to be the rule, and not the exception, to what can exist as a school.

Hunter High School has previously left it to schools to notify city fifth graders who score in the top 10 percent on both the state English and math tests that they can take the Hunter admissions test. This year they will contact all eligible students directly. However, the school still refuses to use criteria like interviews, observations or portfolios of student work for admissions.



Justin Hudson, Class of 2009

RACE AND EDUCATION IN NYC

Percentage of white male students in NYC schools classified as gifted and talented: **7.09%**

National: **90%**
NYC: **91%**

Percentage of black male students in NYC schools classified as gifted and talented: **2.42%**

Black male math results, Grade 4 (2009)
At or below basic:
National: **84%**
NYC: **78%**

Percentage of white males in NYC schools classified as mentally retarded: **0.55%**

Black male math results, Grade 8 (2009)
At or below basic:
National: **87%**
NYC: **90%**

Percentage of black males in NYC schools classified as mentally retarded: **0.90%**

New teacher hires 2001
African-American: **27.2%**
White: **53.3%**

Black male graduation rates (2007-2008):
National: **47%**
NYC: **28%**

New teacher hires 2008
African-American: **12.8%**
White: **66%**

Black male reading results, Grade 4 (2009)
At or below basic
National: **88%**
NYC: **83%**

93,000: Number of predominantly Black and Latino New York public school students who have to pass through metal detectors on a daily basis to enter school

Black male reading results, Grade 8 (2009)
At or below basic:

Sources: 2010 Schott Foundation 50 State Report on Black Males in Public Education, Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence (blackboysreport.org), Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence (bnyee.org), Criminalizing the Classroom, March 2007, nycu.org; New York Civil Liberties Union press conference, October 2007; Community Service Society, cssny.org.



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Education Rediscovered

STANLEY ARONOWITZ

The reasons why public education is suddenly an issue despite years of neglect by politicians and the media are straightforward. In this depressed economy credentials seem to have lost their advantage. Many parents and politicians claim schools have failed to deliver what students need. There is a widespread perception that illiteracy is rising, meaning, for one, that fewer people can read complex texts. And the results of No Child Left Behind with its draconian high-stakes standardized testing have been disappointing, to say the least.

Mainstream educators and commentators warn that the United States, once a leader among advanced capitalist societies in graduation rates, has fallen to 12th place and is still tumbling. Many are concerned that education has become a national security issue. Others point out that the engines of the global economy are math and science and this country is turning out fewer trained physicists, chemists, biologists, mathematicians and computer scientists.

Some trumpet as solutions the usual neoliberal bromides — charter schools and for-profit private schools at all education levels. But, according to numerous studies, these schools rarely live up to the hype. Others have rejected the long American experiment with progressive education, in which students are the subjects of schooling, not just its object. In the 1980s, school authorities decided that kids needed more discipline, more time in school and more homework. The latest brilliant policy concept is to reward or punish teachers for their students' performance.

Teachers unions have soundly rejected this particular "solution," calling it a blatant attack on teacher professionalism and living standards. In a time of severe cuts in school funding, however, many locals of

both major national teacher unions have meekly accepted layoffs, increased class sizes and performance criteria. Above all, neither the unions nor educational authorities have offered serious alternatives to the conservative-led drive toward neoliberal privatization. And the left seems content to roll out the usual proposals: more money for schools, wider access for poor and working-class students of color to higher education and an end to privatization.

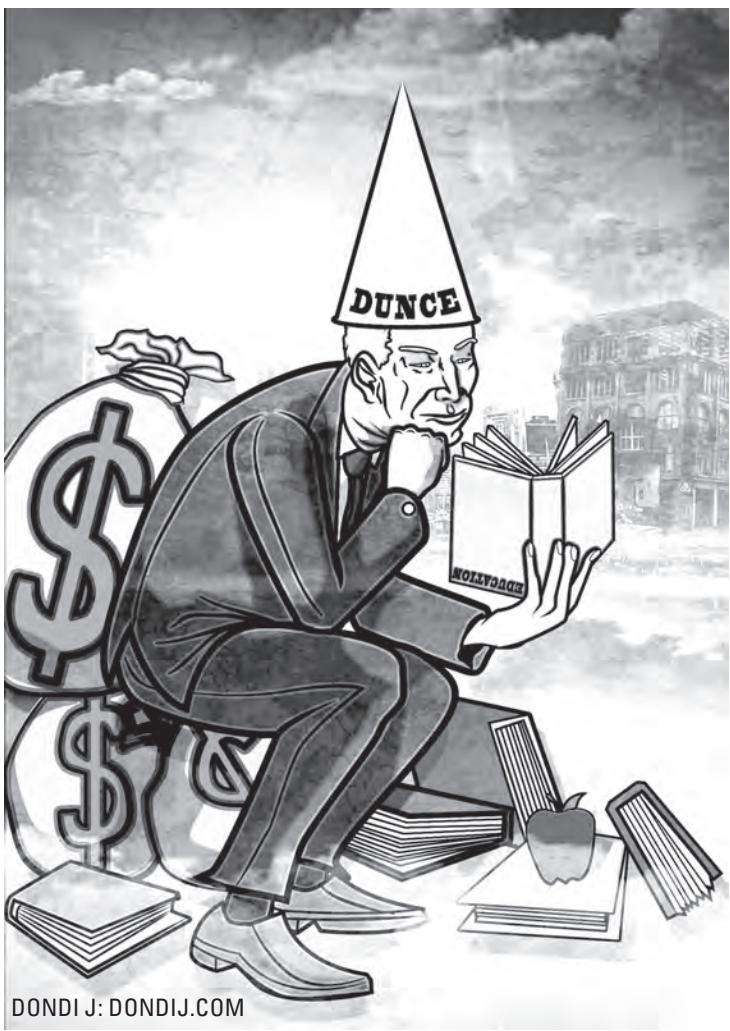
While these reforms are necessary, they are hardly sufficient. The right wants to keep kids' noses to the grindstone by testing them into submission, hand off schools to the for-profit sector and throw unworthy, disruptive kids out of school or at least relegate them to "special education," the only thriving sector in K-12.

Most liberals lack a similarly direct and powerful program. They may praise the centrality of critical thinking, a legacy of the progressive era, but they mainly offer band-aids. That's because liberals have accepted the dominant framework that education, or more accurately, schooling should serve the economy by training students to take their respective places in the world of work.

Not true. What radicals should offer handwringing liberals is what radicals do best: go to the root of things. Education should be a preparation for life, especially helping kids become active in determining the conditions that most affect them.

THE ROOT OF THINGS

Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner, three leading 20th-century theorists of developmental psychology, argued that the curriculum, the heart of school learning, should be articulated with the sensory motor skills of children. They asserted forcefully that imposing academics is inappropriate for young



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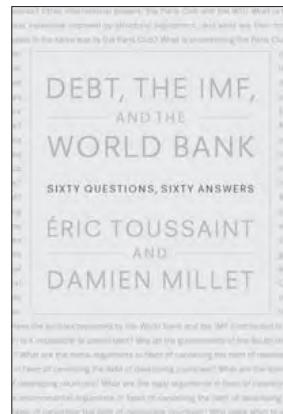
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children until ages eight or nine. They reason that while children aged three to seven have developed significant cognitive abilities, the algorithms associated with the acquisition of most academic skills are really beyond the capacity of most children. This is a time of life when the imagination should be the subject and the object of learning. Reading, writing and math need not be withheld, but the main content of learning at earliest years can be delivered by means of play. The model of kindergarten is the right one for younger kids. They are learning to get along with their peers, to manipulate objects; to experiment with painting, sculpture and music; and to express themselves orally as well. Kids who express an interest in reading, for example, should be encouraged and the teacher should provide suitable materials and integrate reading with play.

ALL THE WORLD'S A SCHOOL

Later, when academics are near the center of the curriculum, the classroom should largely be transferred from the school building to the wider world. Vygotsky described how confining a child to a desk for hours subverts her development. The ages of eight to 12 are times for exploration, for the flowering of curiosity: the city as school means that museums, research laboratories, health and senior centers, concerts, factories, offices, parks and the streets are all learning sites.

“Field trips” are no longer occasional activities but regular events woven into the entire school day. Students meet musicians, artists, industrial and service workers, scientists, urbanists — all of whom become part of the school faculty. Reading, math and science become important components but in terms of assisting the learner to effectively negotiate her environment and to stimulate further critical learning.

At ages 11 or 12, having explored the social and physical environment, the student has acquired the developmental conditions for academic rigor. In this regard, it should be acknowledged that some domains, such as math, science, grammar, history, even music, are full of rote dimensions. But rote should be combined with conveying both the practical and historical significance of basic math, algebra and geometry; the importance of chronology in learning history; the stories, as well as the laws and procedures of physics, chemistry and biology. Ecology should become an important part of every level of education and its comprehension should have a theoretical as well as descriptive content.

At the same time, history and literature should not privilege nationalism. So-called American history is bound up with the African slave trade, the reasons for immigration, the drive for imperial domination, the need of capital for vast supplies of industrial labor (as former slaves were confined to the cotton and tobacco-producing plantations of the South and barred, except as strikebreakers). History shows that workers’ struggles from metal and textile factories to farms and ranches are intrinsic to the American story — beyond the narrative of united interests during wartime — which gives lie to the official ideology that America was the Great Exception to the European experience of class and class struggle. And great American

literature was, and is, produced by Blacks as well as whites and was always bound up with the narrative of American history, from the slave narratives to the works of Melville, Whitman and Hawthorne.

The distinction between middle school and high school should be challenged. The 7-12 grade model could be more widely disseminated because these are the main years for cultivating critical, intellectual capacities. As some educators have discovered, young people of these ages are able to read original texts rather than suffering watered-down textbooks. Music and art must remain a vital component of the curriculum. Students need their own periodicals that they control without interference by school authorities, not only for peer communication but as places where criticism of both school and society can flourish outside official channels.

DON'T KNOW MUCH PHILOSOPHY

In France, high schools have required the study of philosophy, though less so in recent years. High school graduates had knowledge of the main traditions of European philosophy in its classical form: the pre-Socratics,

Plato and Aristotle, medieval thinkers, Descartes and Kant, Bergson and some 20th-century philosophy.

Philosophy has been excluded from the U.S. secondary schools, with the exception of elite, mostly private schools. This is a telltale sign that we don't take critical

thinking seriously as an educational goal. If philosophy has pedagogic value, it is to teach students the value of doubt, without which it is impossible to penetrate propaganda and discern the presence of particular interests within knowledge.

I can hear the critics respond, “All well and good, but who will teach all of this? What happens to teachers trained in the old curricula?” The short answer is that we need a major reformation of education schools. If they are to exist, students must be required to major in subject matter and education becomes only a minor. The education minor should not focus on teaching methods, but on concepts associated with critical thought, that is, philosophy and history, but not only of education. And there needs to be a massive program of faculty development to prepare experienced teachers for the new curriculum. They should not be “trained” but, even as they widen their own scope, should be asked to participate in planning elements of the curriculum. So the curriculum no longer remains the prerogative of central authorities whether administrative or legislative. Renovating teacher education would, of course, involve the professoriate as well. And parents and teacher unions should become part of the planning process.

These ideas are all subject to debate, discussion and revision. Yet without radical political and social movements standing behind educational change, school reform is unlikely except in the cosmetic sense. We need projects that challenge the mainstream if there is to be any change at all. At the moment, these projects are few and largely invisible, partly because they have not made a public display of their difference. But we need to begin to explore what an education reveille for radicals, to borrow a phrase from Saul Alinsky, would look like.

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Queer Youth Embrace Fluid Identities

BY S. LEIGH THOMPSON
AND ALEXANDER SANTIAGO-JIRAU

On Feb. 12, 2008, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney entered E.O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, Calif., pulled out a gun and shot eighth-grader Lawrence "Larry" King twice in the head before a roomful of students.

While we may not comprehend the reasons for this killing, the media soon began to paint a picture all too familiar for our queer youth who have experienced bullying or harassment in school and beyond. Larry was an openly queer teenager who defied gender boundaries and had begun to wear makeup, jewelry and high-heeled shoes to school. He was frequently taunted and eventually learned to defend himself by utilizing anti-queer bias to his advantage — Larry flirted with his bullies. Unfortunately, this tactic worked against him; some say Larry asked Brandon to be his valentine a few days before being shot.

Larry's outcome is not surprising in the case of queer youth. Young queer people often experience intensely negative attention from their peers. Adults commonly dismiss their identities and experiences. And, with few or no role models to guide them into adulthood, queer youth are often left alone to make sense of the oppression they face.

But despite the invisibility, dismissal or hostile attention they receive, queer youth are less inclined than youth growing up in the 1990s

to regard their sexuality as their biggest hurdle or their most important personal quality. Indeed, definitions of queerness have become blurred. Young people today reconstruct concepts of gender and sexuality and create more complex and layered identities. This new cultural landscape challenges adults — including queer adults — to rethink notions about queer adolescents.

In our work with queer youth we use the term "queer" to denote those who do not experience their gender or sexuality within the boundaries of societal expectations. This includes anyone who falls under the LGBT label — those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender — but also it reflects a growing consciousness of fluid gender identities, presentations and sexual orientations that do not necessarily assume a static identity captured within those labels. Queer also reflects an understanding that when gender escapes the bounds of the binary, terms that rely on gender distinction — such as "lesbian," "gay" and even "bisexual" — become less concrete. In addition, queer includes people who are not yet certain of their sexual orientation or their gender identity. Often identified as "questioning," these individuals are still attempting to understand themselves in terms of gender, sexual and/or romantic attraction.

Although their visibility and self-acceptance is growing, queer youth still face serious oppression. Being queer can represent a



DANA VINDIGNI

constant struggle between self-acceptance, authenticity and safety. In school, they are harassed, bullied and even murdered simply for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Identity questions become ones of safety in environments where queer youth are attacked by their peers.

According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2007 National School Climate Survey, 86 percent of LGBT students surveyed reported being verbally harassed in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, while 90 percent of transgender students surveyed reported being verbally harassed because of their gender identity or expression. The threats these students face drive

them to avoid school; queer students skip school at five times the rate of non-queer students, according to GLSEN. This affects their academic achievement and can be detrimental to future educational and professional progress.

Visibility, which is key to ensuring acceptance, can be promoted through incorporating focuses on queer history, literature and culture in the curriculum and invigorating class content with positive queer inclusion.

When the sexuality of queer figures is hidden, it signals to students that either queer people do not contribute to society or the queerness of notable people is shameful and should be hidden. By allowing queer subjects to be broached openly and honestly in the classroom, students learn that these topics — and therefore, queer people — are not taboo.

Additionally, queer youth need allies in the classroom. When queer youth can identify supportive teachers, administrators and support staff, they are more likely to feel they belong in the school community. Coming out as an ally shows a commitment to ensuring that queer students and all youth have a right to learn in a safe and respectful environment.

S. Leigh Thompson and Alexander Santiago-Jirau are co-founders of The Forum Project (theforumproject.org), a New York-based project of artist-advocates who use critical pedagogy to help individuals and communities explore and understand the world.

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Amanda Vender with her son, Miles.

TEXT AND INTERVIEW BY JOHN TARLETON

Do kids want to know what is going on in the world? Amanda Vender thinks so. For the past five years, Vender and a growing team of adult and child volunteers have been publishing *IndyKids*, a colorful, engaging 8-page newspaper for fourth- to eighth-graders and high school English Language Learners. The paper offers an unabashedly progressive perspective on current events and provides a steady diet of stories about kids taking action to make the world a better place. Based in New York, *IndyKids* is produced monthly during the school year (September through May) with five print editions and four online editions. It reaches thousands of stu-

A FREE PAPER FOR FREE KIDS

INDYKIDS CELEBRATES FIVE YEARS

dents and teachers across the country. Vender recently spoke with *The Indypendent*'s John Tarleton about this unique project.

JT: What inspired you to start *IndyKids*?

AMANDA VENDER: I was working at *Time* magazine and noticed they had *Time for Kids*, which is a really nice, glossy publication, and I thought it would be nice if there was something like this but more progressive and grassroots. I didn't have much exposure to anything political when I was growing up. And when I started to become acquainted with political movements and better understood what was really going on in the world and the U.S. government's role in wars overseas in the 1980s, I felt like I should have known this. I spoke with some people at the New York Indymedia Center about my idea and they encouraged me to call a meeting. About eight people came to the first planning meeting for *IndyKids* in June 2005. Some of them are still involved. We published our first issue four months later and haven't stopped.

JT: How have teachers and students reacted to the paper?

AV: A lot of teachers and students really love it, especially teachers looking to introduce something new into their classroom. Teachers who are already open to social-justice issues or would like to have their students think more critically find *IndyKids* fills that niche. And then for kids, we've had a good reaction. Kids really like the mixture of news, entertainment,

puzzles, games, recipes and things like that.

JT: *IndyKids* has been criticized by some, including at least one right-wing talk show host, for being too political. Your thoughts?

AV: Go to any school or public library and look at the publications available, they're horrendous.

They pretend that they're not political and just feed garbage to kids, like fashion tips or violent video games or ads for all kinds of candy. A lot of the librarians and other people we've encountered who are critical say, "*IndyKids* is political and these publications aren't." Our take is that everything is political. If it is promoting simply beauty and violence for kids, that is political also. It's endorsing the status quo, that kids should not care about what's going on in the world.

IndyKids goes against that. Kids do want to know what's going on in the world and they should be informed. They have the right to have access to information. *IndyKids* is there to help them. We don't talk down to kids. We're not afraid to talk about gay marriage, civilian deaths in

Iraq and Afghanistan, torture, spying — *IndyKids* has covered all of these issues during the last five years.

JT: *IndyKids* was founded by adults, but now there are kids working on it too.

AV: We've worked through teachers to reach out to kids and to get kids writing for the paper. We also have some parents who bring their kids to our meetings. Then there are high-school students involved who have more freedom to attend the evening meetings.

JT: You now have two children of your own. Do you think they'll get involved in *IndyKids*?

AV: I think so. My son, who is almost three, already walks around with *IndyKids*, even in the apartment saying, "newspaper, newspaper." So he'll probably be good at distributing and he knows that I go to meetings for the paper. So he is already becoming familiar with the production cycle.

To learn more about *IndyKids*, see indykids.org or call 212-592-0116.

INDYKIDS QUICK FACTS

Founded: 2005

Published:

9 times/year

(5 print, 4 web-only)

Size: 8 pages

Target Audience:

4th to 8th graders

Circulation: 14,000

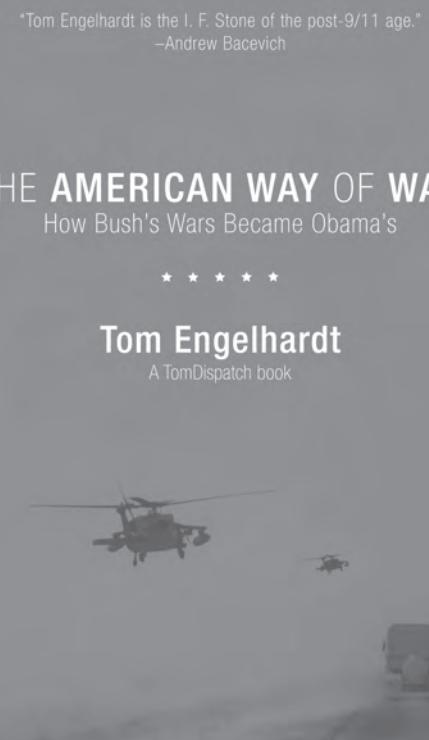
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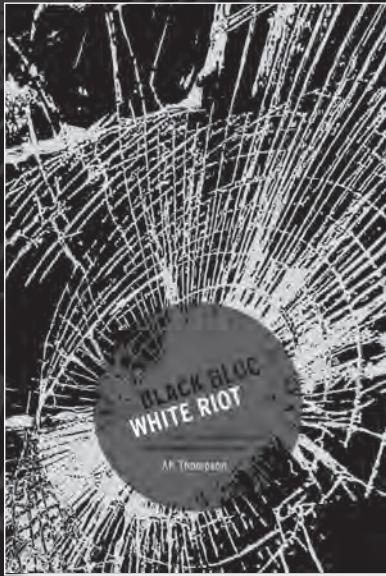
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A School Falls Apart

Continued from page 5

The school's graduation rate is no longer close to the 100 percent statistic it once claimed. Last year, students roamed the hallways at will, disregarding teachers and security staff. We don't have a librarian and the school's most functional computer lab contains less than a full class set of machines. In the three years I taught sixth-grade English, a subject in which I am "responsible" for students' state test scores, I was provided with two sets of books, enough to use in class but not enough for students to take home. One was an anachronistic set of vocabulary words that most students couldn't read, the other was a set of test-prep books.

But that didn't mean there weren't other ways to get materials. One of my more bizarre experiences at FDA was the day I went with my assistant principal to MS 278, a "failing" middle school nearby. She had been called by a colleague at 278 who let her know that we could come and take whatever supplies we wanted before the DOE emptied the school. We filled

her minivan and then called our principal and requested he send a U-Haul to get the rest.

The worst part of working at FDA was the principal, whose management style was described by the district United Federation of Teachers representative as "abrasive." In my experience, shouting was the norm, often peppered with derogatory words and phrases. Neither children nor teachers were spared the kind of verbal abuse one expects from a drill sergeant, not a school principal. But seeing most of my colleagues cowed or resigned to it, I rolled along, until he threatened me one day — saying, "teachers are gonna get their throats cut" — shortly after I and a couple other teachers had called the city and the state to complain about the lack of a certified special education teacher for the sixth grade.

FDA's not the grittiest school in the city or the country, but its shortcomings highlight many of the problems with urban education. Social services and counseling are almost nonexistent. But as I began to advocate further for certain students, I directly exposed

myself to the potential loss of my livelihood. But even our calls didn't solve the special ed problem. Instead, the sixth-graders got a certified teacher at the expense of another class.

This was only the most obvious example of our principal not doing his job. As the year went on I began to compile documentation of harassment. I first called our district superintendent, whose secretary helpfully suggested I look for a job at another school. I also called the DOE's office of special investigations and was told that unless children were being physically harmed at the school, that office was unlikely to investigate any further than calling the school principal. The person I spoke with in the office of special investigations helpfully added that it might "come back on me" if I decided to file a complaint.

I decided to look for another job instead. This year, I start teaching high school at the Green School in Williamsburg, a small school that focuses on environmental sustainability.

I wish my former colleagues who remain at FDA only the best.

8 WAYS TO IMPROVE OUR CITY'S SCHOOLS

- 1 Reduce class sizes. Study after study shows this works, especially in the earlier grades.
- 2 Cut out the scripted curricula and trust teachers to respond to their students' individual learning needs.
- 3 Dismantle financial incentives that make it attractive for school principals to run off experienced teachers in favor of less expensive new teachers.
- 4 Make New York City's teaching force more representative of the communities it serves.
- 5 Empower parents to become real actors in the success of their kids' schools instead of treating them as an obstacle to be avoided or run over.
- 6 Redirect spending from standardized tests and test prep materials, data inquiry teams and other numbers-driven gimmickry to make sure all schools have enough textbooks and other basic supplies for students.
- 7 Dedicate more classroom time and resources toward instruction in science, languages, art and music. These subjects not only enrich the lives of students but are often the reason struggling ones stay involved in school.
- 8 Pull the plug on charter school operators who are more interested in collecting per-pupil funding allocations than providing a decent education for their students.

BY JOHN TARLETON

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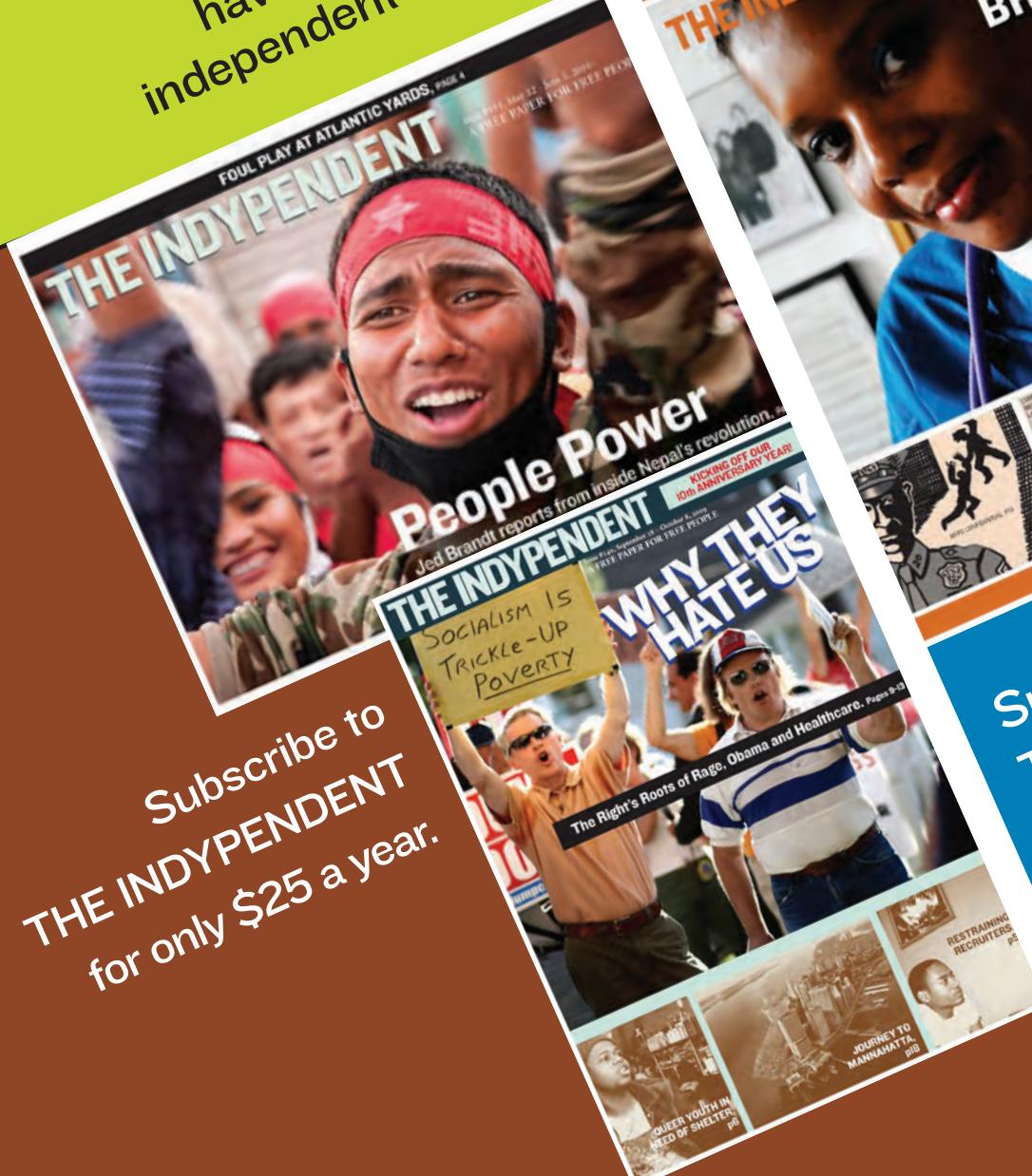


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